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Social class differences affect a student's academic achievement but do not particularly affect his intellectual potential. Adult judgement of intelligence is based upon observation of the student's behavior and his performance on standardized tests. This behavior is in turn affected by the student's motivation, background experience, and attitudes. The lower-class child comes to school with a feeling of personal inadequacy and because he lacks the language skills and general academic know-how necessary in formal learning situations, he inevitably fails. Thus, there is perpetuated a cycle of frustration and failure in which the child's academic deficits become cumulative. The experiences of a Baltimore Head Start Project have shown that for the cycle to be broken these children require a continuous enrichment program with warm, varied, active, and flexible teachers. It is important, moreover, that the worthwhile aspects of the lower-class child's own culture not be destroyed in the educational process, and that the school recognize his language and learning styles. (LB)

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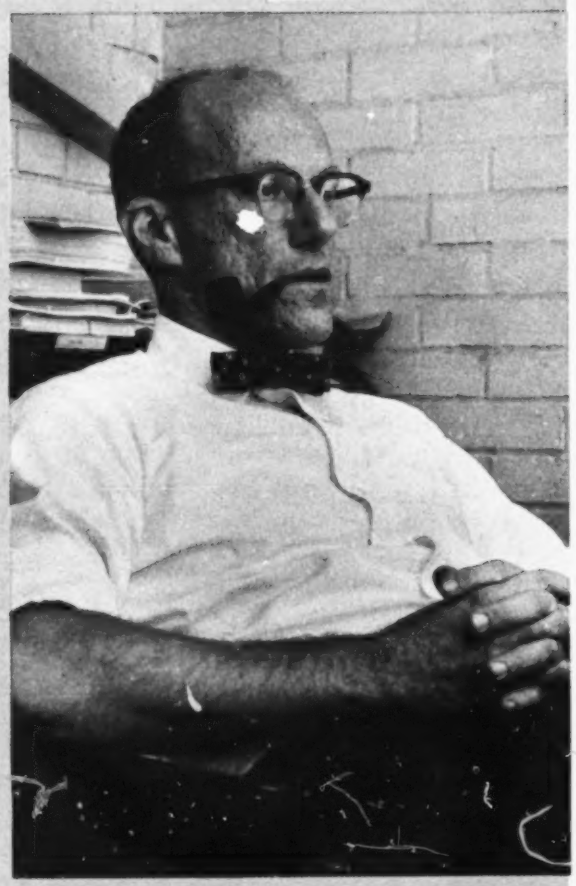

Psychiatrist Eisenberg thinks a child may show his capacities if we can modify his motivation, his experience, his attitude.

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# SOME CHILDREN ARE CONVINCED THEY CAN'T WIN

By Leon Eisenberg, M.D.

When we go into a middle-class school in the city of Baltimore to do studies of learning abilities, we offer the children a prize for playing the game with the technician. These pupils couldn't care less about the prize. They want to be *right*.

We have had a number of instances of a child's taking a test that had no right answer. The child could not tell whether he was right or wrong, and he went home very upset because he thought he had failed. His mother saw Harvard fading from his future, called the teacher, the teacher called the principal, and the principal called us: "What happened?" Actually the pupil had done very well; so well that he finished the test in a short time, but he thought that meant he was being rejected as a failure.

We have had no such experience in a lower-class school. The children there are not test-oriented. Most of them don't care whether they succeed, which is one defense against the expectation that they will fail. The lower-class child in the same test situation is likely to give any answer that will get him out of being tested, regardless of whether the answer is right or wrong.

The teacher who doesn't understand that kind of no-win behavior is likely to ascribe it to lack of intelligence. After all, how do we judge intelligence? You can't look into a head. No Geiger counter is available ▶

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to detect the radiations of intelligence, apart from behavior. Intelligence is judged by performance on tests, which work well for middle-class children (with some exceptions here and there) because they were standardized on middle-class children. Such tests have little relevance to the task of evaluating the lower-class child.

No evidence exists anywhere that the intellectual potential of lower-class children is one bit different from that of middle-class children, except for the one reservation that lower-class life may mean malnutrition and poor medical care. Many of these children are injured *in utero,* in the birth process and in early life, so that more brain damage occurs among lower-class children than among middle-class children. Most of it could be prevented if current medical knowledge were applied equitably across classes. Take away the group with organic brain damage and no difference remains between social classes in "potential," that unmeasurable quality sometimes called "innate intelligence."

Yet, nobody would believe the potential was the same if he visited, say, an all-Negro school in the inner city and a middle-class white suburban school. In the latter the child gets up and speaks in long sentences; he is obedient to the teacher; he sits quietly at his desk, and his written work is exemplary. But if you visited the lower-class school you find a large number of children in the sixth grade reading at less than a third-grade level. Many children who score 2.5 on the standard reading test in the sixth grade had precisely the same score in the third grade.

How can we say they are equally intelligent? Because the manifest behavior of a child that forms the basis of an adult judgment of "intelligence" is determined by motivation, by experience, by attitude. If we can modify these factors, this child may show his capacities.

Self-concept, the individual's inner view of himself *vis-a-vis* the world of others, is a large and inclusive domain. I shall limit my comments to one area: the sense of potency—the extent to which the individual

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thinks he is capable of attaining success through his own efforts. Obviously, no one but a fool or a megalomaniac thinks he can bring his ship safely to shore whatever storms ensue; but the man we take to be well-integrated sees himself as an active participant in the determination of his future. He has a conviction of competence in managing his affairs, unless there are extraordinary circumstances.

There's the rub. We are confronted immediately with crucial differences in experiences which are determined by class: the kinds of circumstances that are ordinary and extraordinary. It is simple enough to learn that apples fall from trees if apples always fall. We can generalize lawful relations between height of fall, velocity and acceleration. But if apples sometimes fell and sometimes rose, at random, no such generalization would be possible; picking them would be frustrating and perhaps beyond accomplishment. We would then be led to suspect malign spirits and might spend our time trying to appease them by magic rituals.

Apples do fall and all of us learn it. But the relationship between personal effort and social reward does not necessarily follow any such simple law of social gravitation. The lower a person stands in the social order, the more it seems that cause and effect occur at random, without patterns.

For the child of the lowest social order—of the disorganized, unemployable, multi-problem family—the world is almost chaotic. The ordinary regularities of time and place in family life—mealtimes, hours of awakening and going to sleep, places for things to be and things to be in place, and the familiar actors in the family drama—all of them shift, change and dance about. Thus acquisition of concepts of space, time and person is retarded, and the concepts are distorted. These fundamentals may be so blurred that they obscure the task of discerning the relationship between what one does and what follows after.

These strictures apply to life at home and to negotiating the middle-class world. In the alleys of the slum, the rules are clear and the child learns fast. The ▶

price of ignorance is too high to pay. But what he learns on the streets has little currency in school and industry. His home has failed him in the fundamental task of providing maps of the middle-class social terrain where the rewards of our society are found.

It is difficult to sustain a conviction of personal competence in a child whose language is impoverished, who is unfamiliar with formal learning situations, and whose responses are concrete and situation-bound. These things insure failure in a school that expects him to arrive already trained. The school rejects the behavior he has acquired for survival on the streets.

School becomes the place where he discovers what he cannot do rather than a place where he is taught to do. Unless he walls off the school hours as irrelevant to real life, he acquires an abiding sense of incompetence. As he sees it, he tried and failed. Dr. Gilbert Schiffman in a study of 80 slow learners found that, despite intelligence at least in the low normal range, these children were looked upon by their teachers *and* their parents as dullards. It is no surprise that four-fifths of these children, upon being asked to rate themselves in intelligence, described themselves as dull or stupid.

The conviction of one's own inadequacy or lack of potency means that when a child is confronted with something new, he doesn't try to learn because he knows before he begins that he can't. Academic skills are cumulative, so he falls further and further behind, and his self-concept becomes progressively less adequate. Survival as an individual then depends on deciding that school is not important, and self-esteem is found in being good at stick ball or fighting with the other kids or showing you're not chicken.

The child's sense of himself in relation to academic skills comes from repeated exposure to frustration and failure, and to the presence of the teacher who, all too frequently, reinforces his poor self-image by seeing *him* as the failure: not the system, not her inadequacies, not his slum environment, but the child himself. I have met all too many teachers who are convinced that intelligence and wealth go together and that the poor children are the way they are because they are stupid. "The children inherit the characteristics of the parents," they say.

However, the basic issue is not one of parental "reassurance" or saccharine compliments from the teacher for a child who performs poorly. A sense of potency can be derived only from the experience of mastery: seeing one's self, hearing one's self, feeling one's self succeed. For a teacher to accomplish that, with a child who enters school proficient in academically undesirable behavior and deficient in the fundamental skills required for academic learning, she must understand the child's range of abilities and style of learning. Then she must build on the skills he has and work to shift his attitude so that he will try to develop competence.

Our studies of some 500 children who were enrolled in the Baltimore Head Start program have shown a record of progressive gains derived from only six weeks of specialized school training and individual attention. Their competence remained inferior to middle-class standards, but their improvement was highly significant. Such benefits, documented for the short run and stemming from brief intervention, can in fact lead to enduring benefit in intellectual performance *if backed by continuing enrichment.*

But the benefits of the Head Start program cannot be duplicated, let alone expanded into a year-round educational diet, in classes of 40 and 50, with teachers prepared only for middle-class children, at schools that are architectural monstrosities. We would not, after all, anticipate that starting a good diet at age 5 would protect a child against malnutrition at age 6. The mind, like the brain, requires food—biochemical, physiological and cognitive—at every stage of its development.

This will not be done—it has not been done—at the average inner-city elementary school, with its overcrowding, its educational impoverishment, and its generally negative attitudes toward the poor. It will not be done as long as there is resistance in the administrative bureaucracy and teachers' organizations to the compulsory assignment of the best teachers to the poorest schools. It will not be done as long as there is the same entrenched resistance to providing financial incentive or other rewards for inner-city service.

What is required is a commitment to provide a sustained diet of enrichment for those who come to school starved—already imbued with some or much of the pessimism, the defeat, the cynicism of the slum.

These children enjoy a recreation period in the Baltimore Early School-Admissions Project.

Many teachers shy from the challenge of entering the psychological world of children of a quite different culture; yet it is not all that overpowering. Our study of Baltimore teachers involved in Operation Head Start found that teachers who were rated as warm, varied, active and flexible tended to produce the most IQ improvement. These attributes are not uncommon among dedicated teachers.

The role of the teacher would seem less awesome if it were understood that inspiring faith and confidence in children of previously undeveloped potential need not include attempts to turn lower-class boys and girls into middle-class facsimiles. The children of the slums have their creativity and their own sense of values which must not be destroyed if they are to survive in the world to which they must return after school hours. A child's values will not be destroyed by his being taught to read, to have better health habits, and to grapple with realities of the world unless, in the process of being taught, what is worthwhile in his own culture is degraded or minimized.

The lower-class child, for example, is apt to be far more straightforward in conveying feelings than middle-class children. He has not learned how useful it is to be deceitful in a competitive world, and it would be a misfortune if in grappling with realities he lost his directness and candor, which are refreshing after one adjusts to them. Conditions of lower-class life also tend to promote co-operativeness. One finds more sensitivity and helping of peers among lower-class children.

While the middle-class child goes to school in order to bring home A's (and must explain if he doesn't), the lower-class child holds his paper out for his neighbor who is failing the test and helps him to cheat—but he doesn't see it as cheating. He sees it as helping this other kid out of a situation where he might have trouble. Cheating is wrong, but it takes understanding and patience to explain where his sense of values is amiss, compared with that of the middle-class child who hides his paper so the child next to him doesn't do as well as he does.

The lower-class language, too, has value in its expressiveness and emotional tone. When a lower-class child says "me ain't going," that is a perfectly satisfactory sentence for communicating meaning. However, if he says that to an employer in trying to get a job, it is likely to cost him his job opportunity.

The lower-class child should be enabled to master the formal language of the middle class as though he were learning a foreign language because it is useful and intellectually stimulating, and there should be no suggestion to him that what he speaks is in anyway an inferior language.

The educational and mental-health responsibilities of the public schools are interdependent: enabling children to learn, to acquire skills, to experience mastery and on that basis, to develop a sense of potency. The schools must assume that the potential is present in all children, regardless of social class, at least until the best program of social and educational enrichment we can design has failed. Only then can the suggestion of intrinsic deficit be logically maintained. ○